



Brighter Flights

JEFFERSON CITY —There's some good news coming out of our public education system: Missouri's students are getting smarter. The bad news for some is: Missouri's students are getting smarter. I know it might not seem possible for both of these to exist at the same time, but I'll explain.

Missouri students are doing well on their college entrance examinations, especially the ACT test. More students understand the importance of not just studying for this test, but preparing themselves for the kinds of questions they are being asked on those exams. It is heartening to see the average ACT test scores in Missouri nearly half a point above the national average (2007 Missouri composite ACT test scores: 21.6; 2007 national average: 21.2). I think we can chalk up some of this success to the extra money we have been able to pour into our public schools—half a billion dollars more over the past three years. But much of the success should be credited to our young people who are taking the test more seriously than ever before. They have worked, and they have achieved. That's the way it should be.

But the higher test scores have had one drawback. It has actually meant that some students who thought they would receive the Bright Flight Scholarship of \$2,000 a year for four years are not getting that money. Why? Well, the Bright Flight Scholarship is based on the top 3 percent of those taking college entrance exams getting the money. For years, that has meant an ACT composite score of 30. The higher test scores have raised that threshold to a 31, but it's still the top 3 percent. So while the test scores might have changed, the percentages did not.

There is some good news for students. They have until June of their senior year to get a score that will count toward the Bright Flight Scholarship. That means the seniors this fall can take the test up until and including this coming June's test date. If they've already taken the test and scored below the 31 threshold, they still have a chance to take it again for this scholarship, even though their school might need their test score earlier than that.

More good news is on the way in the increase we've made to the Bright Flight program. Starting in 2011, the scholarship will go from \$2,000 a year to \$3,000 a year if you're in the top 3 percent of college entrance exam takers, and a new, \$1,000-a-year scholarship has been added for those testing in the top 3-5 percent. I had anticipated this change to happen and attached an amendment to the higher education bill this session along with a Democratic senator from St. Louis. Together we saw the need for the additional money and the lowering of the percentage, but we both did not expect this increase in scores to happen as early as 2008.

Our budget constraints would not allow for the increase until 2011, but I will continue to support strong economic growth in our state so we can continue to fund and possibly move up the dates for these worthwhile scholarships.

The competitiveness of Missouri students is showing in their academic endeavors every day. So while rising test scores might make it a little tougher to get the money, we're making sure the brightest and most-deserving will have those resources as they continue their studies.

If you have comments or questions about this week's column or any other matter involving state government, please do not hesitate to contact me. You can reach my office by phone at (866) 271-2844.